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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 000551

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PK](#)

SUBJECT: LONG MARCH ROUND UP AS OF 1700 LOCAL TIME, MARCH 15

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Citing fears for his safety, the GOP placed Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader Nawaz Sharif under a restraining order early in the day, but backed off to allow him to address the crowds - estimated at 70 - 80,000. Ambassador spoke to Interior Minister Rehman Malik, Prime Minister Gilani, President Zardari and Nawaz and Shahbaz Sharif about USG concerns for Nawaz's safety. Kites and tear gas mingled in the air in Lahore as the city held Basant celebrations, even while protesters gathered in GPO Chowk. SMS and Blackberry service has been disrupted throughout the country, but the anticipated cut-off of all cell phone services has not yet occurred.

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Islamabad  
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¶2. (SBU) The capital area remained quiet March 15, although local staff have not been able to enter Islamabad from Rawalpindi. Air travel in and out of Islamabad continued through morning, but the main routes from the airport to downtown Islamabad have been blocked by security forces. Security around government buildings and in the diplomatic enclave has been enhanced and the GOP has cut off SMS service on mobile phones.

¶3. (C) Ambassador and PO Lahore had numerous conversations with Interior Minister Rehman Malik, Governor Taseer, PM Gilani and the Sharifs during the day on March 15, underscoring USG concern for the safety of Nawaz Sharif. Malik had raised GOP concerns about Nawaz's safety and reported that two suicide bombers had been intercepted the night before as they tried to make their way into Islamabad.

¶4. (C) Prime Minister Gilani told Ambassador in a midday conversation that he is moving forward with reconciliation efforts, but that he believes the need to appeal to their constituency will prevent the Sharifs from making an announcement of reconciliation until after the long march.

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Punjab  
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¶5. (SBU) After police put Nawaz and Shahbaz Sharif under restraining orders (vice house arrest) that allowed them to go no further than 50 meters from their place of detention, both brothers managed to elude police. Shahbaz left for Islamabad and remains in an "undisclosed" location in Rawalpindi. Nawaz emerged from his Model Town residence in early afternoon in a slow-moving motorcade en route to a

speech at the Lahore High Court. As of this writing, he has not reached the speech venue. The police backed off to avoid further violence. There are reports PML-N supporters have moved the buses, tractors and containers that blocked the Lahore-Islamabad highway. Unless police or Rangers stop his progress, Nawaz is expected to arrive at GPO Chowk by 1800L, when he will address the marchers. When and how (or if) he will lead the march to Islamabad is unknown.

¶6. (SBU) GPO Chowk in front of the Lahore High Court has seen the largest clash between the demonstrators and police, who after throwing tear gas, moved barriers back to give the marchers more room. Political party workers seemed to outnumber attorneys, based on news footage.

¶7. (SBU) High-level arrests included former Supreme Court Bar Association president Aitzaz Ahsan (who, following Nawaz's example, has left his house) and, in Islamabad, Javed Hashmi. Many PML-N leaders formerly detained, such as Sardar Khosa, now accompany Nawaz in his motorcade. Tehrek-e-Insaf leader Imran Khan is in hiding.

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Sindh  
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¶8. (C) PML-N Additional Secretary for Information Sardar Abdul Rahim, who is now in Islamabad, told Post that most attorneys and PML-N supporters from Sindh (he estimated around 3,000 from Karachi alone) who planned to join the long march were already in Lahore and Islamabad. However, former

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Sindh Pakistan People's Party (PPP) General Secretary Nafis Siddiqui estimated that only 100-150 Karachi attorneys managed to evade police and reach Islamabad and Lahore. He did not have an idea of the total number of supporters from Sindh participating in the lawyers' long march. An official at the Karachi Bar Association refused to give Post any estimate of participants from Sindh. (Comment: Post has no way of verifying the number of participants from Sindh, but suspects that Rahim may be exaggerating his estimates. End comment.)

¶9. (C) Sindh Senior Minister Pir Mazhar-ul-Haq said the PPP had decided to cancel a planned anti-long march rally scheduled for March 15 in the northern Sindh city of Sukkur. According to Haq, PPP leaders came to the conclusion that granting themselves a waiver to section 144 for the event would look hypocritical in light of current events.

¶10. (C) Rahim opined that all parties should defer the issue over the Sharifs to Parliament for resolution. Haq told post that he suggested to Shahbaz Sharif a few days ago that all political parties should work to repeal the 17th amendment and make Parliament the supreme governing body of Pakistan. According to Haq, Shahbaz Sharif said former Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry had to be restored first. Both Haq and Rahim said the turmoil was benefiting extremists by giving them the opportunity to move into the power vacuum.

¶11. (C) Supreme Court Bar Association President Ali Ahmed Kurd told Post that he planned to try to fly to Islamabad on a 4:40 p.m. flight to join the march. If PIA officials again denied him a boarding pass, he planned to stage a demonstration in Quetta. (According to press reports, Kurd was permitted to board but the flight has been denied permission to depart Quetta.)

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NWFP  
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¶12. (SBU) No demonstrations or other long march related activities occurred in Peshawar in the last 24 hours. The road between Peshawar and Islamabad has been closed in

several locations, including one which prevented the Consulate FSN staff from coming to work.

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Military  
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¶13. (C) Pakistan Army units received warning orders to be prepared to offer assistance to civil authorities. The independent 111 Brigade and 16 Division are on high alert, as is one brigade per Army Corps. If ordered into action, the Army units will augment the police and paramilitary forces to help re-establish law and order, however none have yet been ordered to execute this mission.

¶14. (C) An attach from a NATO ally drove around Islamabad this morning and looked at areas historically used as staging areas by the Army, specifically the area adjacent to Jinnah Stadium. He observed no unusual activity. The attach assessed that law enforcement, including the police, Frontier Constabulary and Punjab rangers, are deployed well outside of the city on the major approaches.

PATTERSON